DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 262 361 CG 018 596

AUTHOR Beckman, Linda J.
TITLE Childlessness, Family Composition and Well-Being of Older Men.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Child Health and Human Development (NIH), Bethesda, Md. Center for Population Research.
PUB DATE Aug 85
CONTRACT HD-02804
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (93rd, Los Angeles, CA, August 23-27, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Daughters; *Family Size; Fathers; *Males; *Older Adults; *Sons; Spouses; *Well Being
IDENTIFIERS *Childlessness

ABSTRACT

Although it has been suggested that contact with children is important for the satisfaction of the economic, emotional, and service needs of older parents, social gerontology research provides little direct evidence that childless elders or elders with few living children are less satisfied than others. To examine the effects of family size, family composition, and childlessness on elderly men, personal interviews were conducted with 252 married men aged 60 and older; 159 were fathers and 93 were childless. The interview schedule and self-administered questionnaires assessed five dimensions of well-being, demographic characteristics, social interaction, health, and religiosity. The results indicated that the childless men did not differ significantly in demographics from men with living children. Older childless married men did not differ on well-being from older married fathers, although fathers reported being more satisfied with their current fertility status than were childless men. Moreover, the number of children was not related to well-being for fathers. Men with all sons reported significantly lower well-being than did men with children of both sexes and somewhat lower well-being than did men with all daughters. Although these findings support the contention that childlessness has no effect on the well-being of elderly husbands, they may not apply to more socially isolated groups of older men or to the frail elderly. (NRB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED262361

Childlessness, Family Composition and Well-Being of Older Men[1]

Linda J. Beckman, Ph.D.

California School of Professional Psychology, Los Angeles

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Linda J. Beckman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG018596

[1] Paper presented at the American Psychological Association Meetings, August, 1985, Los Angeles, California. This research was supported by contract HD-02804 from Center for Population Research, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and an ADAMHA Research Career Development Award.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

Five dimensions of well-being were measured among 159 older married fathers and 93 older married childless men. As predicted, fathers and childless men had similar levels of well-being although fathers were more satisfied with their current fertility status than were childless men. Number of children was not related to well-being for fathers. Men with all sons had significantly lower well-being than men with children of both sexes and somewhat lower well-being than men with all daughters.

It has frequently been contended that childlessness or having few children has negative psychological, economic and social effects. Yet, research has found little evidence that the childless or those of low parity are more dissatisfied with their lives or unhappy than others (e.g., Beckman & Houser, 1982; Pearlin & Johnson, 1977; Feldman, 1974; Van Keep, 1975).

The overwhelming majority of research, however, has focused upon relatively young adults who are in or recently beyond their childbearing years and upon women, rather than men. It can be argued that because grown children satisfy their elderly parents' objective and subjective needs, lack of children may have its greatest negative effect on individuals when they are elderly (Shanas & Hauser, 1974; Treas,1977). Therefore elderly persons without children will have lower life satisfaction and social-psychological well-being. Theoretical and empirical evidence suggests that contact with children is important for the satisfaction of the economic, emotional and service needs of older parents (Lopata, 1978; Treas, 1977; Streib, 1974).

Social gerontology research, however, provides little direct evidence that childless women or men or those elderly with few living children are less satisfied or have lower well-being than others (e.g., Beckman & Houser, 1982; Lee & Ellithorpe, 1982; Mancini, 1979; Watson & Kivett, 1976).

While several past studies have examined the effects of number of children on well-being and mental health few have examined the effects of sex of children on well-being of the elderly. It is generally believed that daughters are closer to mothers

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

than fathers and the presence of a child of the same sex may provide greater emotional benefits to the parent, thus positively affecting well-being. Some research suggests the importance of daughters for elderly parents (Houser & Berkman, 1983; Litman, 1971; Lopata, 1973). For instance, Lopata's study (1973) of older widows suggests that daughters provide more emotional and social support than do sons.

The purpose of the present paper is twofold. First, I will investigate whether the lack of significant findings on the effects of childlessness on well-being previously reported for elderly women (i.e., Beckman & Houser, 1982) also applies for older men. Second, for elderly fathers the effects of family size and family composition on well-being will be examined.

Methods

Personal interviews were conducted with 252 married men aged 60 and over who lived in Los Angeles County; 159 were fathers and 93 were childless.

Sample

To be eligible for the sample men had to be currently married non-Hispanic Caucasians over 60 years of age who resided in Los Angeles County. Eligible men also had to be English-speaking and capable of their own daily care and maintenance(i.e., dressing themselves, shopping); they could not have children presently living at their home or be living at their child(ren)'s home and could not be living in an institution. Childless men were defined as those who had no biological or adopted children. Those with children from previous marriages were classified as fathers if they considered these children to be their <u>own</u>

children and maintained contact with them.

A three stage sampling procedure was used. First a sample of older widows aged 60 to 75 was selected through death certificate records. Next, these women were asked to nominate female neighbors between the ages of 60 and 75 who were currently married and living with their husbands. Both of these groups were interviewed as part of a previous study of the well-being of older women (Beckman & Houser, 1982). Finally, 1 1/2 to 2 years later husbands of women who had previously been interviewed and men whose wives would have been eligible for the earlier study but who had not been selected for participation were interviewed. Approximately one-fifth of the men in each group (i.e., 20% of childless, 19% of parents) had a wife who had not previously participated in an interview.

A total of 526 men were contacted by mail and telephone follow-up to solicit participation. Nineteen percent did not meet eligibility criteria for the study. Among those potentially eligible to participate 35.7% refused participation. This figure, however, is inflated by those who refused to participated before their eligibility could be determined (27% of all refusals). When only those known to be eligible to participate are considered, the refusal rate is 28.7%.

Instruments

The interview schedule and self-administered questionnaires assessed well-being, demographic characteristics, social interaction, health, and religiosity.

Well-being was measured along five major dimensions. Three

 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

dimensions were assessed through use of the Lawton Revised Philadelphia Geriatric Morale Scale (1975). They are Attitude Toward Own Aging (i.e., the belief that life gets worse as one gets older), agitation (i.e., worrying excessively, taking things hard, getting angry and upset), and Lonely/Dissatisfaction. Depression was assessed through use of the Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale (1976). Social isolation was measured via the 9-item Dean Social Isolation Scale (1961). These particular instruments had previously been developed or used with elderly populations. They also were chosen because they represent different facets of well-being and appear to have reasonable reliability and validity.

When a factor analysis using the individual items from all five scales was computed, the first factor had an eigenvalue two to three times the size of the other eigenvalues, indicating the presence of a general factor. Therefore, the first principal component, i.e., the unrotated factor with the greatest eigenvalue, was extracted and used as a general measure of well-being. Items involving dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and loneliness had the strongest loadings on this overall well-being factor.

Demographic variables included age, education, socioeconomic status, income religion, number of siblings and employment status. Measures of current status included included physical capacity (based on a summary score of degree of difficulty in performing seven daily activities), the presence/absence of a serious illness in the last year, and religiosity Measures of social interaction included strength of support network (i.e., the number of persons the respondent felt can always be counted on

 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

in times of need), number of confidants (i.e., those close enough to talk to about things really bothering the respondent), total amount of social contact and satisfaction with quality of social contact.

Results

Characteristics of the Sample

The sample had an average age of 70.6 years, an average education level of 13.4 years and were predominantly Protestant (59%). Thirty-three percent were currently employed. Childless men did not differ significantly in demographics from men with living children.

Effects of Childlessness on Well-Being

Analysis of variance was used to examine the relationship of parenthood status to the five well-being dimensions and the overall well-being factor. Older childless married men did not differ on well-being from older married fathers. They were not any more depressed, lonely, dissatisfied or socially isolated than were elderly males with children.

Despite the lack of zero order differences, overall well-being was examined with 13 covariates controlled through analysis of covariance since it was possible that some of the covariates that were correlated with parenthood status could be suppressing the effects of childlessness on well-being. The covariates measured background, current status and social interaction dimensions. When the effects of the 13 covariates were taken into account, neither the overall slopes nor the adjusted means differed for the two parity groups, that is all the covariates

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

together showed a similar degree of association to the dependent variable for both groups and, more importantly, the parent and childless groups had similar levels of well-being.

The lack of differences in well-being for fathers and childless men does not imply that both groups are equally satisfied with their current status concerning children. Childless men reported lower satisfaction with current parity (rated on a five-point scale from "very dissatisfied "to "very satisfied") than did fathers ($F = 26.36$, $df = 1,246$, $p < .001$). Although most men perceived themselves as very satisfied with number of children, 42% of the childless and 14% of fathers saw themselves as neutral or on the dissatisfied side of the scale. Eighty-six percent of the childless but only 48% of the fathers wanted more children than they had. Thus, it appears that childlessness leads to lower satisfaction with family size, although it does not influence well-being.

Effects of Number of Children and Family Composition

The effects of number of children on fathers' well-being also was examined. Comparison of the five individual well-being scores and the overall well-being index of fathers with one child (n=30), two children (n=68), or three or more children (n=51) using one-way analysis of variance revealed no significant differences. However, on the overall well-being factor and 3 of the 5 specific dimensions (i.e., Lonely/Dissatisfaction, Social Isolation, Depression) the three or more children group had the highest mean well-being scores. On the overall well-being factor and on all 5 specific dimensions fathers with only one child had the lowest well-being scores.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

I also examined the presence of children of different sexes on the well-being of older married fathers. Although effects were relatively small, the presence of certain combinations of sons versus daughters affected both overall well-being and two of the five specific well-being scales. Three groups were compared using analysis of covariance: men with all sons(n=40), men with all daughters (n=38) and men with at least one child of each sex (n=71) with number of children used as a covariate. Results shown in Table 1 suggest that elderly men with different family compositions differ in well-being. Men with children of both sexes have the highest well-being while men with all sons have the lowest well-being. Men with all sons had significantly lower overall well-being ($t=2.95, p<.01$), higher depression ($t=2.28$, $p<.05$), and higher lonely-dissatisfaction ($t=2.69 p<.01$) than did men with children of both sexes. Those with all sons also had somewhat greater depression ($t=1.91$, $p<.06$) than did those with all daughters.

Discussion

These results support the contention that childlessness has no effect on any dimension of well-being of elderly husbands. Other results, however, suggest that childlessness may be associated with poor well-being for certain subgroups of the elderly such as women who have been widowed within the last five years (Beckman & Houser,1982) and those male and female elderly in poor health and with working-class backgrounds (Bachrach, 1980). Thus, these findings may not apply to more socially isolated groups of older men or to the "frail" elderly.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Given my prior research that suggests that sex-composition does not affect older wives well-being, the results showing that husbands having children of both sexes have higher well-being than do those with all sons is suprising. The lower well-being found for those who only had sons could be interpreted as suggesting the importance of having at least one daughter since daughters are more likely to satisfy parents emotional needs and caretaking needs than are sons (Lopata, 1973; Houser & Berkman, 1983). On the other hand, differences between the all daughter group and the other two groups generally were not significant; therefore, these findings more probably indicate that having at least one child of each sex is most desirable since sons may satisfy certain needs (carrying on the family name; providing financial support; providing advice; being "successful" in a career) that daughters traditionally have less frequently satisfied. Whether this pattern of differential need fulfillment will remain in the future given changing sex-roles is unclear.

References

Beckman, L. J., & Houser, B. B. (1982). The consequences of childlessness on the social-psychological well-being of older women. Journal of Gerontology, 37 (2), 243-250.

Dean, D. G. (1901). Alienation: Its meaning and measurement. American Sociological Review, 26, 753-758.

Feldman, H. (1974). Changes in marriage and parenthood: A methodological design. In: E. Peck & J. Senderowitz (Eds.), Pronatalism. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.

Houser, B. B. & Berkman, S. L. (1983). Sex and birth order differences in filial behavior. Unpublished paper.

Lawton, M. P. (1975). The Philadelphia Geriatric Center Morale Scale: A revision. Journal of Gerontology, 30, 83-89.

Lee, G. R., & Ellithrope, E. (1982). Intergenerational exchange and subjective well-being among the elderly. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 44, 217-224.

Litman, T.J. (1971). Health care and the family: A three generational analysis. Medical Care, 9, 67-81.

Lopata, H. Z. (1973). Widowhood in an American city. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman.

Mancini, J. A. (1979). Family relationships and morale among people 65 years of age and older. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 49, 292-300.

Pearlin, L. & Johnson, J. (1977). Marital status, life-strain and depression. American Sociological Review, 42, 701-715.

Shanas, E., & Hauser, P. M. (1974). Zero population growth and the family life of old people. Journal of Social Issues, 30, 79-92.

Streib, G. F. (1977). Family patterns in retirement. In: M. B. Sussman (Ed.), Sourcebook in marriage and the family. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Treas, J. (1977). Family support systems for the aged. The Gerontologist, 17, 486-491.

Van Keep, P. A. (1975). Childfree cheer. Human Behavior, 4, 44.

Watson, J. A. & Kivett, R. (1976). Influences on the life satisfaction of older fathers. Family Coordinator, 25, 482-488.

Zung, W. W. K. (1967). Depression in the normal aged. Psychosomatics,8, 287-292.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table 1. Effects of Family Composition on Well-Being.

	Adjusted means			F-value[a]
	All boys (n=40)	All Girls (n=38)	Both (n=71)	
General well-being factor	-0.36	0.03	0.24	4.48*
Agitation[b]	4.66	5.04	5.22	NS
Attitude toward own Aging[b]	2.93	2.98	3.50	NS
Lonely/Dissatisfaction[b]	5.18	5.39	5.62	3.62*
Social Isolation	23.18	23.45	22.86	NS
Depression	36.00	33.14	32.74	3.04*

[a] From one-way analyses of variance.

[b] On the Philadephia Geriatric Morale Scale high scores indicate low agitation, more favorable attitude toward own aging, and low loneliness/dissatisfaction.

* $p<.05$.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE